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AUTHOR Morris, Judson H.; Hilbert, Judith Cicero
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ABSTRACT

A manual, geared toward training social workers going into rural areas, provides a brief discussion of the natural helping relationships found in rural communities and a simulation game to be used in acquainting social workers, clients, and students with the rural network. Objectives of the simulation game, Nets and Links, are to train people to identify: (1) actual helping resources within the environment; (2) potential helping resources and develop a plan for their utilization; (3) sectors of conflict within the network which affect the functioning of the client system; and (4) sectors of the network in which greater coordination of helping resources is needed. A multicolored dart board is used to represent arenas of network activity (client systems, relatives, community members, clubs, union members, job coworkers, government agencies, human services and schools, religious organizations, others, and friends). Corresponding colored push pins, which are numbered, are used to represent individual members of various sectors, thus allowing simulation participants to track network members. Also included are: game directions, questions for discussion, a case example to be used for network analysis, a drawing of the game board, and an identification sheet to code arenas of interaction. (AH)

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# Training Social Workers, Clients, and Students in the Use of Rural Natural Helping Networks

Judson H. Morris, Jr., York County Department of Social Services and
Judith Cicero Hilbert, Case Western Reserve University

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An important, and frequently overlooked, resource for the social worker in a rural community is the natural helping network. Rural communities may have well-developed systems of informal helping and mutual aid although formal, professional services are relatively scarce. These informal helping patterns and parallel formal human services can be utilized in a number of ways by rural social workers to extend the amount, quality and variety of help available to persons in need.

The natural helping network is a system of community self-help that has been alive and well since the beginning of human society, long before social services were organized and/or funded. The concept of the "folk society" depends upon individuals helping each other for their own well-being and community survival. Most natural helping networks develop "spontaneously", in response to community needs, and are composed of community people and the linkages among these people.

## Understanding Rural Helping Networks

The prevalence of natural helping networks is especially important in rural areas because of limited agency resources, lack of transportation to services, a mistrust of government intervention, and a sense of community pride and self-sufficiency. For these reasons it becomes imperative for rural social workers to learn about and utilize natural helping networks. At times, rural social workers have lost sight of the potential of natural helping networks. As a result, even though documentation about natural helping networks does exist, rural social workers may not know enough about networks and even less about how to work with them in coordinating helping efforts. Another reason rural social workers may lack understanding of natural helping networks is mutual mistrust--natural helping networks fear they may be supplanted by formal organizations and social services agencies fear for their jobs if community helpers are found capable. Both formal and informal resources are, however, vital helping

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systems. "Were it not for the informal services of helping networks, social agencies--whether they recognize it or not--would be swamped. Besides carrying the bulk of the service load in many sectors, helping networks also carry out a widespread prevention program. They offer accessible, individualized services that formal agencies could never match."[1]

A "natural helping network" is a system of help and assistance for and of community members which develops spontaneously, caused by community needs. It is not controlled by formal organizations; i.e., social work agencies. Natural helping networks are fluid and stable. A network is composed of community people and the linkages among these community people. These community people assume various roles within the network system, which has a tradition of helping, giving advice and information, and mobilizing the system to assist its members.

Each natural helping network system has a "hub", "pointperson", or "natural neighbor."[2] Some of the roles that these network nodes might have are: cuerandero, mailperson, retired teacher, family doctor, church minister, church secretary, county sheriff, babysitter, and many others. Rural social workers need to be able to identify the community network "hub" person, learn from them, and mobilize network system to assist their community clients. The key to success is how can rural social workers utilize a rural community's natural helping networks without changing them and their effectiveness.

How does the "hub" (facilitator) of the natural helping network grease the rails for their "community family"? Whom does s/he call first? Does it depend on the problem, persons, or interaction of both? Or are there other unseen variables? The social work community refers to this process in terms of roles such as brokering, facilitating, advocating, mediating, but natural helping involves more than is captured in these professional terms.

When there is a successful resolution of a network's problem, there is a sense of community pride and feeling that it was a community problem, not just a maladjustment to a social problem. This phenomenon changes with communties, depending on a variety of factors. Some of these factors are: ethnic and racial background of the network members; the identified problem; how long the network has been in existance; the "hub" of the network; and the "persons with the problem". At times there is additional stress on a natural helping network because the "hub" of the network changes depending upon the "presenting problem". This "network change" is also dependent upon the skills, knowledge, and values of the "hub".

## Using Simulations to Develop Knowledge of Networks

How do rural social workers learn these important factors without disrupting, changing, and possibly disabling the natural helping network system the social worker is trying to mobilize for the well-being of the client system? There are many ways that this needed knowledge about helping networks can be learned. Observation is one technique. The use of readings and studies of networks is second. Third is to use modified sociograms and "community network maps".[3] Fourth technique is through the use of training simulations. The most effective learning takes place when all of these techniques are utilized by the rural social worker.

Through the use of social simulations the rural social worker can create, modify, and develop strategies for work with a network the social worker would like to study, utilize, or mobilize. By using simulations, the rural social worker can develop needed skills in a safe environment--safe for both the social worker and the natural helping network. One point that can be emphasized in a network simulation is the need for participants to acquire respect for a community and its natural helpers. Natural helping networks can help social services agencies, if social workers take the time to learn and understand these fragile systems. How do rural social workers effectively learn about natural helping networks, and learn how to utilize them for the improved conditions of their client systems without changing, disrupting, and destroying the natural helping network? Helping social workers, clients and students to answer this question was the purpose[4] and objective of the training simulation, "Nets and Links".

## Nets and Links

Net and Links is a simulation game designed to train social workers, clients, and students to recognize, analyze and utilize natural helping networks. Objectives of the simulation include:

1. To identify actual helping resources within the environment of the client system.

2. To identify potential helping resources and develop a plan for their utilization.

3. To identify sectors of conflict within the network which affect the functioning of the client system.

4. To identify sectors of the network in which greater coordination of helping resources is needed.

Nets and Links provides a major advantage of simulations: being able to develop and practice new skills and knowledge in a safe environment--safe for the social worker, network, and clients. Nets and Links, which has its roots in sociograms and "systems mapping," teaches 1) how networks are effective, for whom, and why and 2) how to alert the "node" of the network, that point-person, or "natural neighbor"[6] that a rural social worker is in need of the services and involvement of the natural helping network when a client is seeking resolution of the presenting problem and subsequent problems. This technique can be especially useful in crisis intervention.

Nets and Links was specifically designed to assist social workers with their client systems and natural helping networks in rural and "rurban"[7] communities, but Nets and Links is a "frame game" and can be utilized in any community where the helping network and client system can be identified. "A frame game is a game in which different variables can be added, subtracted, or exchanged; without changing the goals and interaction of the game; e.g. Monopoly and Spin n' Solve".[8,9] Even though Nets and Links is a frame game, it is not a "gamed" social simulation. There is no scoring, no winners or losers, or evaluation, but there is a debriefing session in which the simulation participants analyze why they made certain decisions, and how these decisions would impact on a real natural helping network.

Game participants begin by reading a case example or using an actual case which contains information about the client, the client's problems and needs, and members of the client's helping network. Next, game participants construct a model of the client's helping network. The simulation utilizes a multi-colored dart board (see Figure 1), and corresponding colored push pins. The dart board is divided into the following sectors which represent arenas of network activity:

Bull's eye: Client System (silver)
Section 1: Relatives (orange)
Section 2: Community Members (blue)
Section 3: Clubs (dark yellow)
Section 4: Union Members (white)
Section 5: Job Coworkers (light green)
Section 6: Government Agencies (black)
Section 7: Human Services Agencies and Schools (light yellow)
Section 8: Religious Organizations (dark green)
Section 9: Others (red)
Section 10: Friends (pink)

The push pins represent individual members of various sectors of the helping network. The push pins are numbered to allow the simulation participants to "track" network members whom they have identified. These numbers correspond with the

Identification Sheet (see Figure 2) which is utilized during the debriefing phase of the simulation.

Using the design of a dart board and the push pins for identification of the helping network allows the simulation participants to visualize how a community helping network looks, to understand how it works to assist a specific client system, to identify the location and types of conflict within the network, and to involve clients themselves in analyzing the natural helping network. By using the dart board and push pins, the simulation participants not only can identify persons in a natural helping network and their functions but also can analyze the distances between network members and the client system and among members of the network itself. Using multi-colored thread for the purpose of identifying the type of communication between network members was considered (Blue-Positive, Red-Negative, Yellow-Neutral) when Nets and Links was initially designed. It was decided not to use these props because of the difficulty of using thread with the push pins and dart board.

Nets and Links has been used by social workers, clients and students. When the simulation has been used by social workers and clients, the simulation participatns use real life problems and current problem cases. Abused and suicidal clients who have used Nets and Links have acquired new hope and knowledge of community resources through the other simulation participants and a Nets and Links assessment of their network and its potential for helping. When Nets and Links has been used in a social work field experience the students have been able to "see" and realize how natural helping networks function. When using real life situations the social work students have been able to use the simulation and the accompanying group process to find solutions to their client's problems. For the classroom use of Nets and Links, a case example has been developed so that students inexperienced in knowledge of natural helping networks can be involved in "designing", analyzing, and utilizing a rural community's natural helping networks for their clients' benefit.

Through playing Nets and Links graduate social work students have learned how rural natural helping networks can be utilized for their clients. When playing Nets and Links social workers and students acquire a new respect for natural helping networks, and a better understanding of the various relationships of the members of a helping network. After playing Nets and Links human services professionals have been more willing to accept natural helping networks' involvement with their clients and the potential for natural helping networks to become an alternative to the formal human services agency system.

How does the rural social worker "tap" (utilize) natural helping networks? The rural social worker can learn these "tapping" skills through the use of experiences, asking

questions, readings, and relevant social simulations. Nets and Links not only furnishes the rural social worker with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and practice new skills, but also affords the social worker and clients the chance to develop strategies to solve their own problems through the use of a community's natural helping network and their initiative.

Nets and Links "operationalizes" why a natural helping network relates or reacts to certain network members i.e., the network node, and to the problems the network confronts. This can be especially true of communication patterns, linkages, and either the overuse, underuse, or isolation of certain network members. In addition, Nets and Links can be useful to determine why certain persons are treated one way by one group in a network system, and another way by another group within the same natural helping network.

When Nets and Links has been used in a social work field experience, social work students have been able to "see" and realize how natural helping networks function. "When using real life situations the participants in Nets and Links have been able to use the simulation and the accompanying group process to find solutions to their problems. Nets and Links participants acquire a better understand of why, for example, certain people are in conflict within the same helping network (the live-in boyfriend who is helping his girlfriend, but the woman's parents disapprove of the relationship). In the classroom, graduate social work students have learned how rural natural helping networks can be utilized. For the classroom use of Nets and Links a case example has been developed so that students inexperienced in knowledge of natural helping networks can be involved in "designing", defining, and utilizing a rural community's natural helping networks.

Almost every client is a member of a network system (if not, perhaps this is the primary problem of the client). How does the rural social worker assist the client in activating the helping network system to aid the client? At times, the first assessment event that needs to be accomplished by the social worker and the client is to identify the natural helping network that the client is a member of, or could be a member of (i.e., extended family, church, job). Does this helping network have a "pointperson" (an individual or group who usually intiates the helping process for network members) whom the rural social workers and clients should contact for needed assistance? Are different helping networks "subject specific" (i.e., child care or older persons' needs)? Are the helping networks specific to certain people regardless of the problem? Or do networks help various people depending upon the "presenting problem" or who refers them? Or is the network a mix of all these possibilities, and more? "If simulation games are employed as an integrated part of the curriculum, it is

likely that the effectiveness of simulation games would increase".[11]

It has been suggested that the 1980's will become the decade of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, but no one is totally independent. With the involvement of one or several natural helping networks when problems or crises appear, a person, family, or community can strive and maintain self-determination even if there is a "scarcity of resources". Rural community natural helping networks can be of continued help to social work agencies as long as rural social workers remember that natural helping networks are fragile systems and that effective practive with natural helping networks requires thoughtful assessment and coordination.

Game Directions:

1. Diagram the network case example using the Nets and Links push pins and board. Utilize the board areas, representing arenas of interaction, and corresponding color push pins, representing members of the client's network.

2. Select a push pin to represent each member of the client's network and decide in which board area the pin is to be placed.

3. Determine the distance that network members will have to each other and to the identified client system. This determination should be based upon the intensity and/or frequency of the relationship. Within each board area, place the push pins so that persons who interact frequently or intensely with the client are located closest to that client system.

4. Using the Identification Sheet, write the name of each network member under the appropriate arena of interaction and in the appropriate number.

5. Place the symbol NH on the Identification Sheet next to the network members who could be the network's natural helpers.

6. After the push pins have been placed on the board and the Identification Sheet has been completed, the following questions should be discussed by the game participants.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the distribution (number of pins in each section of the board) and balance (distance of pins from the client system) of this client system's network?

2. How do the network distribution and balance influence the client system's use of energy, time, and resources for dealing with problems?

3. What are the arenas of network underuse? What additional resources in these arenas might be utilized?

4. What are the arenas of network overuse? Can use of these resources be reduced?

5. What are the arenas in which resources could be better coordinated?

6. Are there arenas in which conflict exists among network members? How can conflict be reduced? How does conflict among network members influence the client system's resources for dealing with problems?

7. If you were a human services provider, how might you work with this network to assist this client system?

8. Complete the following question by filling in the blank:

   Anyone who plays this game can learn _____.

Case Example to be Used for Network Analysis:

Beth Bolton is a 29 year old divorced mother of two children: Anita, age 7, and Bobby, age 6. She and the children have lived in the small town of Ridgeway all of their lives. Beth's parents also live in Ridgeway. Beth's sister, Ann, and her brother, Charles, live in the nearby community of Winnsboro. Beth knows and is known by most of the community of Ridgeway and has many friends. Beth graduated from Ridgeway High School and throughout her life has been a member of a local church. Her minister is known as someone who is involved in helping persons who have problems.

Currently Beth is receiving AFDC. Her job as a waitress at the Bar B-Q provides an adequate but unstable income as she often quits or is fired. Last year, when she was unemployed, Beth became extremely depressed and was voluntarily hospitalized. Beth is now receiving treatment at the community mental health center.

For the past year Beth has had a live-in boyfriend, Tony. The relationship is stable, and the children regard Tony as their father. Beth's parents are angry that Beth has "taken up" with Tony, especially since Tony has been charged with manslaughter and is currently awaiting trial. Tony works at the Winnsboro timber mill about 20 miles from Ridgeway. Often Beth and Tony nave difficulty getting to work on time because they have only

one car--Tony's. Beth has to find a ride or drive Tony to work and use his car. This is a problem, because Tony does not trust her driving skills since she had a car accident last year. Robert, Beth's ex-husband, is unemployed and lives with his parents in Winnsboro. He is trying to get the children placed in his custody.

The public health nurse has visited the home and knows that Tony and Beth often do not get home from their jobs until 8 P.M. and that the children are sometimes left at home alone until they return from work. Bobby is in school, has diabetes, and needs glasses. Anita has head lice and is failing school. Recently, the family dog ran away. Beth, as a result, is drinking and smoking more. She is becoming increasingly depressed.

One of the things Beth is most proud of is the trophy her baseball team won last year. She also feels good about the union sponsored electrical class she has begun to attend but worries because she does not have the needed tools for electrical repair work.

FIGURE 1

NETS AND LINKS GAME BOARD

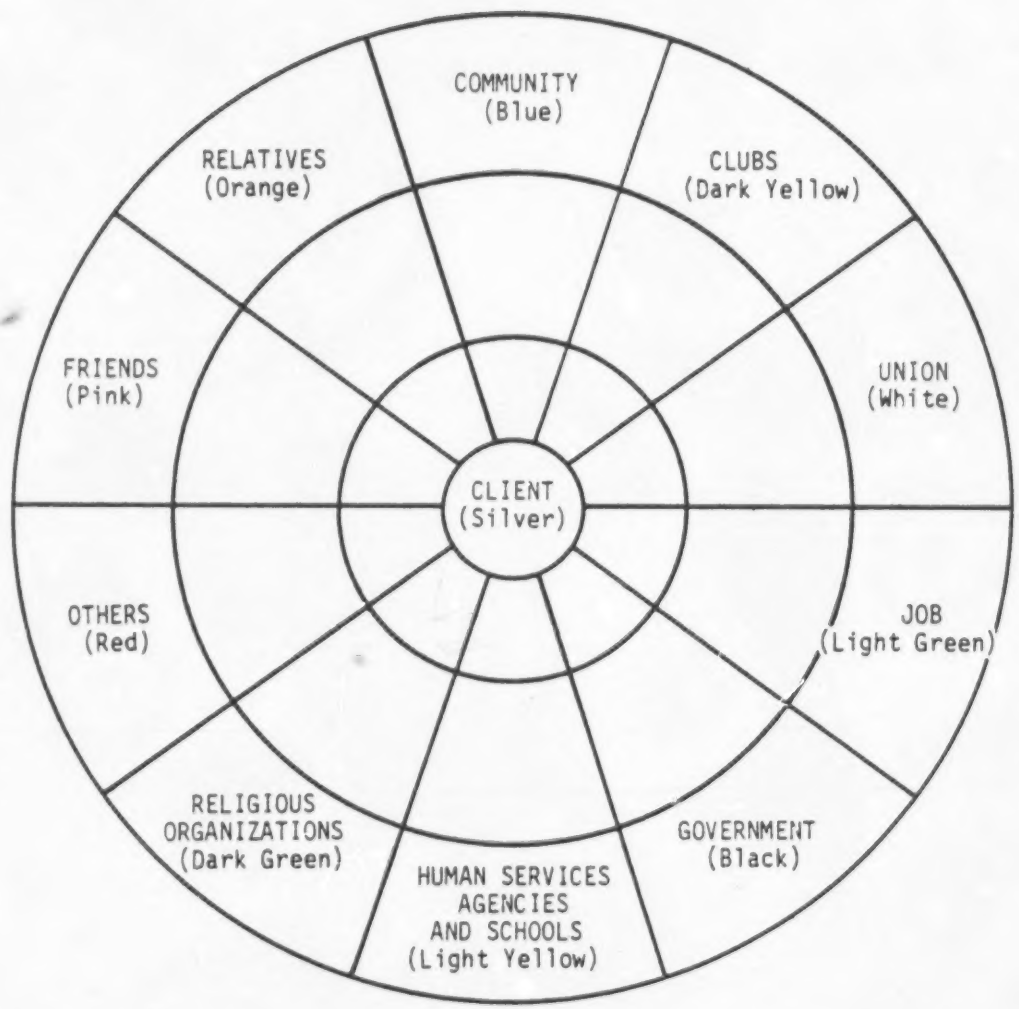

FIGURE 2

Client System (Silver) NETS AND LINKS IDENTIFICATION SHEET

_____ ARENAS OF INTERACTION

| Relatives (Orange) | Community Members (Blue) | Friends (Pink) | Others (Red) | Religious Groups (Dark Green) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) | 1) | 1) | 1) | 1) |
| 2) | 2) | 2) | 2) | 2) |
| 3) | 3) | 3) | 3) | 3) |
| 4) | 4) | 4) | 4) | 4) |
| 5) | 5) | 5) | 5) | 5) |
| 6) | 6) | 6) | 6) | 6) |
| 7) | 7) | 7) | 7) | 7) |
| 8) | 8) | 8) | 8) | 8) |
| 9) | 9) | 9) | 9) | 9) |
| 10) | 10) | 10) | 10) | 10) |

FIGURE 2 (CONTINUED)

Client System (Silver) NETS AND LINKS IDENTIFICATION SHEET

_____ ARENAS OF INTERACTION

| Human Services and Schools (Light Yellow) | Government (Black) | Job Coworkers (Light Green) | Union Members (White) | Club Members (Dark Yellow) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) | 1) | 1) | 1) | 1) |
| 2) | 2) | 2) | 2) | 2) |
| 3) | 3) | 3) | 3) | 3) |
| 4) | 4) | 4) | 4) | 4) |
| 5) | 5) | 5) | 5) | 5) |
| 6) | 6) | 6) | 6) | 6) |
| 7) | 7) | 7) | 7) | 7) |
| 8) | 8) | 8) | 8) | 8) |
| 9) | 9) | 9) | 9) | 9) |
| 10) | 10) | 10) | 10) | 10) |

NOTES

[1] Alice H. Collins and Diane Pancoast, Natural Helping Networks, (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers, 1978): 25.

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